

The Religion of the Future.

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THE question, What will be the Religion of the Future? is one which has been often asked and never answered satisfactorily. Even Herbert Spencer was at last forced to confess that men need some kind of religion. The Religion of Reason (we know by whom represented) in the Reign of Terror in France, the Religion of Humanity or Comtism, Natural Religion, and many more, have been "made to order" on the shortest notice. Christian Science, Spiritualism, Dowieism, Theosophy, *et hoc genus omne*, are also candidates for the place which some are perhaps "a little previous" in declaring vacant. Certainly none of these can be said to show any sign of being likely to fill it.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, shortly before His Passion, made a clear statement upon the subject. In words, the meaning of which is unmistakable, He said: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life: no man cometh unto the Father but by Me."

Only a generation ago it was possible for men to question, not the significance of this claim, but its justice. It seemed to many as if the Master had stated that, though men might strive hard to come to God in other ways, He had quite arbitrarily refused to accept them unless they came to Him through Christ. Men said that they could not reconcile this with their innate conceptions of the Divine Justice and Mercy. Surely He would accept all who came, however they came, whether they styled Him "Jehovah, Jove, or Lord."

Now, however, the difficulty has vanished, and we learn from both history and Comparative Religion that our Lord was not stating any arbitrary rule, but merely a *law of human nature* arising from our necessary limitations. This we now proceed to show.

It is related of Bishop Cotton that once while travelling in India, he saw a Buddhist monk laboriously engaged in turning

his prayer-wheel. The Bishop asked for what he was praying. "For nothing," was the answer. "To whom are you praying?" "To no one." This admirably expresses what genuine Buddhism teaches about God and worship. In one of his last addresses Buddha said to his disciples: "Being your own Lamp, abide ye as your own Refuge, recognizing no other Refuge." He recognized no power superior to the man himself who could help him in reaching *Nirvâna*, or extinction, the dreary goal which he set before his followers. Modern Buddhists have, indeed, many objects of worship, but this is completely contrary to their founder's teaching. Our late expedition to Lhasa has gained for us a truthful but no very noble picture of their worship in Tibet. In Burma the Census Report for 1901 informs us that Buddhism forms only a thin veneer over the aboriginal *Nat* or demon-worship of the people. In Ceylon Bishop Copleston states that the people, though professing Buddhism, offer adoration to evil spirits alone. In Japan Buddhism is losing ground, and has already lost the respect of the people. It has failed there and in China to give any knowledge of God, though it sanctions idol-worship. We find in Japan Shintoism, and in China another form of ancestor-worship and the adoration of evil spirits among the Taouists, but only once in the year was worship offered to "Heaven," and then only by the Emperor of China. In India we find 333,000,000 of gods and goddesses, mostly evil, and symbols so vile that we dare not describe their true nature. The "Mother" referred to in the cry, *Vande Mâtaram* ("I invoke the Mother"), so often quoted, is Kâlî, the goddess who delights in bloodshed. Some of the worst crimes human nature can commit are committed in India in honour of the gods. The more enlightened of the people, though sanctioning these evils, are pure Pantheists. One of their able writers, in criticizing Mr. Balfour's "Foundations of Belief," wrote to this effect: "This author seems to assume it as an axiom that God hates the evil and loves the good. But for thousands of years we Hindûs have been thinking about God, and we have never yet been able to believe that He is a moral Being, that He cares more for good than for evil."

If we pass to the Mohammedan world, we find that they conceive of God as, so to speak, an Oriental despot, devoid of love, justice, and mercy, though claiming titles which imply His possession of these attributes. One of their traditions, resting upon Mohammed's own statement, is that, when God wished to create mankind, ages before the creation of our bodies He created our spirits. Dividing the spirits of men, as yet unborn, into two hosts, He placed one on His right hand and the other on the left. Turning to those on His right hand, God said: "These to Paradise, and I care not"; and then, turning to those on the left, He said: "These to hell fire, and I care not (*wa lâ ubâli*)." Such is the God worshipped by some 260,000,000 of the human race.

It is hardly necessary to speak of the various forms of heathenism found among savages in Africa and elsewhere, of their human sacrifices, of their unholy rites. Truly, "the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to devils and not to God." It cannot be claimed, even by the most ignorant of the opponents of the Gospel in England, that such religions reveal God to man. And the same is true with regard to the "great" religions of the past and of the present, as we have seen. The conception that they give of the Divine is evidently an impossible one. Even Islâm, with all its many Divine titles, regards that of "Father" as blasphemous. The study of all these religions, even at their best, shows how absolutely impossible it is for any human being by them to "come unto the Father."

What shall we say of the Philosophies of the world, if its religions have failed in doing what they claim to do? We find Socrates and Plato in Greece, with many before and after them, groping almost as in the dark, feeling after God, but never in this life able to find Him for want of the "Divine word" for which Plato longed. Later Greek philosophy, with its Epicureanism, Stoicism, Pyrrhonism, wandered farther from God instead of approaching Him. In India, in China, we find philosophy taking the place of Polytheism in a similar way, but in the case of every philosophy the failure to "find out God," a God whom man can know, and love, and worship, is manifest.

Pantheism or Atheism, or a declaration that God could not be known, was everywhere the result of ages of earnest search. In modern Europe, among men who have rejected or never accepted Christ, we find the same dismal failure to discover an object worthy of devotion. Men have told us of a "Power not ourselves that makes for righteousness," of "the Unknowable," the "Unknown." Agnosticism by its very name declares its failure. Such men, the best and most earnest of them, hardly attain to the level of the heathens of Athens in St. Paul's time, for they cannot even erect an altar "to God Unknown" (*Ἀγνώστῳ Θεῷ*).

Have we not then learnt from history, from philosophy, from all religions but one, by their failure, and from that faith by its success in changing hearts and consecrating lives, that the claim of Christ is true, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father but by Me"?

What then is to be the Religion of the Future in all lands? Only one religion is possible for thoughtful men. They have to choose between Christianity and Atheism.

Men urge us to let the heathen and the Mohammedan alone, to leave them to cling to their old faiths, and tell us that it is illiberal, fanatical, narrow-minded, to obey our Lord's last command and "preach the Gospel to all creation." However much or however little of the good and the true may be found in these Ethnic faiths, the advice to leave them alone comes too late. They are doomed. Not merely the missionary but the schoolmaster, the newspaper, the progress of even secular education, and the spread of European influence, good or bad, are rapidly destroying these false religions. Who among us Englishmen could go back to the worship of Odin, of Thor? could look forward to the Valhalla of our Saxon ancestors? Great Pan is dead. Just as even the greatest opponents of Christianity in Europe are devoid of all faith in such deities as our heathen forefathers worshipped, so more and more the Hindus, the Japanese, the Chinese, are learning the falsity of the gods they have long adored. Śiva, Viṣṇu, Kālī, Kṛiṣṇa, Rām, must

follow in the footsteps of Jupiter, Venus, Apollo. Various forms of Neo-Hinduism and Neo-Mohammedanism are endeavouring to stave off the evil day, but they are really hastening the downfall of these ancient creeds. The majority of the young Indians educated at Government schools and colleges have given up all faith in their ancestral gods, and many openly profess to be Atheists. In Japan, not long since, many were said to have "swallowed Herbert Spencer wholesale," and such could hardly claim to be Buddhists or Shintoists any longer. His influence there, as here, has waned—all such systems do—but the old gods are not again enthroned. The knell of all such religions has already sounded; they cannot be preserved as living faiths.

The question of the day in the mission-field is no longer whether these false systems are to last or not; it is, What is to take their place? That is what confronts us to-day abroad, what we have just as much to answer at home. Is the Religion of the Future to be Christianity, or is the world to lapse into the dreary blackness of hopeless Atheism?

Atheism has never yet ruled the world. Belief in a God or gods and in a future life has existed among all races of men, in some form, from the earliest prehistoric times of which we have any knowledge. This Anthropology has proved. Even a heathen poet has said: "Πάντη δὲ Διὸς κεχρήμεθα πάντες." In only one land has Atheism been even once tried for a time as a national substitute for religion—in France during the Reign of Terror. What the state of the world would be, were men in general to adopt the same policy, imagination shrinks from attempting to conceive. Yet, if the world is not to become Atheistic, there is only one thing to be done. Nothing can give us a new religion now. No religion can satisfy man but the one. The world must choose between Christianity and Atheism, and it rests largely with us Christians of the present generation what the answer shall be to that sad question of Christ: "When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?"